U.S. Army Corps, El Paso Border Patrol collaborate to LEED into the future

When the Army Corps of Engineers' mission to provide innovative and sustainable engineering services to strengthen the nation's security is employed to help further the Border Patrol's mission of protecting the nation and enforcing its laws, the result is a cooperative working relationship that will serve both agencies well into the future. The most recent result of this cooperation is the new Border Patrol station recently completed in El Paso, Texas, by the Corps.

The U.S. Border Patrol celebrated its 85th anniversary in May. However, its function dates to the earliest days of the United States. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers history has a similar legacy predating the Declaration of Independence.

The Border Patrol's history is closely linked with that of customs collection. One of the first acts of the first U.S. Congress was to establish the U.S. Customs Service which oversaw ports of entry, collected tariffs and enforced immigration laws. In the mid 19th century, the federal government began to focus on border security and established the U.S. Customs Border Patrol in 1853.

El Paso has long had an important role in securing the nation's southern border and has been on the cutting edge of new initiatives to improve effectiveness and efficiency. In the early years of the 20th century, mounted guards operating out of El Paso patrolled the border all the way to California, although they were never a large force and operated on an irregular basis.

With a rise in illegal immigration in the late teens and early 1920s, federal officials realized the need for regular and comprehensive inspection between ports of entry and inspection stations along the border. In May 1924 Congress established the U.S. Border Patrol with the passage of the Labor Appropriation Act of 1924. The newly created agency was organized under the Immigration Bureau within the Department of Labor.

The El Paso Border Patrol Sector was the first station activated as a uniformed law enforcement branch of the Immigration Bureau (although the agents didn't actually have uniforms until 1928). Two directors were placed over the Border Patrol in 1932 – one in charge of the Mexican border office in El Paso and the other in Detroit who was in charge of the Canadian border. El Paso was also the site of the first Border Patrol training academy, Camp Chigas.

Building Innovation

The El Paso Sector has collaborated with the Corps of Engineers to lead in initiating and implementing new ways to improve their primary mission, which according to Patrick Berry, an agent with the Border Patrol, is "to defend our nation against terrorists and terrorist weapons from entering into the United States while improving the quality of life in the community that we serve by reducing crime." Successes in El Paso have prompted similar programs and initiatives in other parts of the nation.

Tremendous growth in staffing and enforcement-related assets as well as the normal aging of infrastructure has presented many challenges for the Border Patrol in El Paso. Some of these challenges include deficiencies in parking space, storage locations, computer equipment, and a lack of training space.

Berry also says that El Paso has taken the lead in being aware of their environmental impact and in seeking ways to minimize it. The Corps of Engineers has partnered with the Border Patrol in this effort. The result is a new 49,000 square foot Border Patrol station in northeastern El Paso. The station is the first of three phases to eventually include a vehicle maintenance shop and the Sector's headquarters.

The station was built on the southwest corner of the Castner Range, a former military firing range located near Fort Bliss, Texas. This brought some unique obstacles to the design and construction process. Because it is a large, undeveloped stretch of land within a rapidly developing part of El Paso, there is concern by local residents over how it should (and should not) be developed. Part of the issue involves safety - since it was a former firing range there was unexploded ordnance, or UXO, that had to be cleaned up before the land could be developed.

The Corps of Engineers was involved in the clean up process to ensure the safety of those working on the former range. When that was completed, the agencies involved worked hard, in the words of the U. S. Army Chief of Engineers and Commanding General of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, General Van Antwerp, "…to get her done."

Jeff Firebaugh, project manager with the Corps of Engineers, said that the cooperation by everyone involved "shows a good relationship between the Corps and the CBP [Customs and Border Patrol]." With the increased federal focus on border security, the working relationship between the two will continue to exist well into the future.

Because of concerns brought to the design team by the public, this is the first Border Patrol station in the nation to incorporate environmentally conscious elements into its design. The Border Patrol and the Corps are expecting it to receive Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, certification, which is an internationally recognized third-party verification system that defines and measures how "green" a building is.

The LEED rating system has several environmental categories with points awarded for satisfying performance criteria in each. A building must have at least 26 points to be certified.

Ways the station meets performance criteria include low amounts of Volatile Organic Compounds, or VOC's, in sealants, paints, carpets, and office furniture; using recycled materials in 80 percent of all construction materials; a 35 kilowatt Photovoltaic System, or solar array, which will provide a portion of the buildings energy needs; occupancy sensors which turn off lights when no one is present; the usage of 100 percent recycled water in the vehicle wash bay system; and the use of Light Emitting Diode, LED, lights in the vehicle Sally Port. LED lights use approximately 56 percent less energy than conventional Metal Halide lights. Additionally, to minimize the amount of waste generated during construction, the contractor, Banes Construction, used specialized dumpsters to facilitate the recycling of leftover construction materials.

All of this in an aesthetically pleasing building makes the new station a showcase site that has garnered attention from top officials. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano noted in a June 26, 2009, Efficiency Review Update the 25 percent reduction in energy costs the station would have.

It's also garnering praise from the agents who will use it. In Berry's words, "As an agent, I view this new facility as one more way that our nation is supporting the job

we are doing on the border, and I am anticipating the move to our new station with enthusiasm."

And drawing on historical trends, El Paso's successful partnering with the Corps here might prompt similar stations across the nation.